

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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ENDANGERED SPECIES COMMITTEE COMPLETES REPORT ON GRAYROCKS AND TELlico

The Cabinet-level Endangered Species Committee has released its written decision reflecting its unanimous January 23 actions conditionally exempting the Grayrocks Project in Wyoming from Section 7(a) of the Endangered Species Act, and denying any exemption to the Tellico Project in Tennessee.

Chaired by Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus, the Committee was created by Congress in adopting the Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1978. The legislation specifically required decisions by the Committee on the two projects within 90 days after the Amendments became law--in effect, a deadline of February 8, 1979.

Section 7(a) says in part: "Each Federal agency shall, in consultation with and with the assistance of the Secretary (of the Interior), insure that any action authorized, funded, or carried out by such agency does not jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of habitat of such species which is determined by the Secretary...to be critical."

To exempt any project from that section, the Committee must determine that there are no reasonable and prudent alternatives to the project; that the benefits of the project "clearly outweigh" those of alternative courses of action consistent with conserving the species or its critical habitat, and the project is in the public interest. In future cases the Committee will also have to determine if the project is of regional or national significance. When an exemption is granted, the Committee also is required to establish "such reasonable mitigation and enhancement measures" as are necessary and appropriate to minimize the adverse effects of the action upon the species or habitat involved.

The Grayrocks Dam and Reservoir is being built near Wheatland, Wyoming, by a group of public power entities to store some of the waters of the Laramie River for cooling three coal-fired electric generating plants designed to produce 1,500 megawatts of power for consumers in eight States. Part of the construction costs are guaranteed by the Rural Electrification Administration, and the project has a Section 404 dredge-and-fill permit from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Laramie flows into the Platte River, parts of whose basin in Nebraska has been determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be critical habitat for the endangered whooping crane. Only about 115 of these spectacular birds continue to survive in a wild state. The Platte River areas are crucial to their normal migration pattern, and abnormally low river flows could allow the vegetation to change, making these areas unsuitable for the cranes.

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